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Okaloosa County Health Department Recognizes HIV Testing Day

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FORT WALTON BEACH, Fla. — June 27, 2019, commemorates National HIV Testing Day (NHTD). First observed in 1995, NHTD is meant to encourage people to be aware of their HIV status so that they can take control of their health. This year's theme, **"Doing It My Way,"** highlights how and why people make testing a part of their lives. The Florida Department of Health in Okaloosa County joins community partners across the country to emphasize the importance of getting tested, knowing your status, and getting linked to care and treatment.

"Individuals ages 13-64 should be tested for HIV at least once," said Dr. Karen Chapman Director of the Florida Department of Health in Okaloosa County. "Individuals potentially at risk for acquiring HIV should be tested at least once a year. Your county health department offers fast, free and confidential HIV testing. By knowing your HIV status, you can protect your health and the health of the community."

In 2017, 116,944 Floridians were confirmed to be living with HIV. An estimated 18,000 more were living with HIV but unaware of it. "To see these numbers come down in our state, we need to recognize the role of stigma as a barrier to getting tested," said department HIV/AIDS Section Administrator Laura Reeves. "Normalizing HIV testing and making sure there's a testing option that works for everyone is one way to reduce stigma. This is important, because knowing your HIV status gives you the power to make informed decisions about your health. Our goal is to work with our partners to make sure every Floridian has that power."

Get Tested.

Did you know that there's more than one type of HIV test? Most use either a blood sample or fluid swabbed from the inside of your cheek. There are different settings in which you can take an HIV test, too, including in the comfort and privacy of your own home. Visit KnowYourHIVStatus.com to learn more about testing options in your area or to order a free at-home HIV testing kit mailed directly to the address of your choice (while supplies last).

Knowing your HIV status is just the beginning.

It's crucial that people living with HIV begin treatment as soon as possible. Immediate treatment with antiretroviral therapy (ART) typically leads to long, healthy lives for people living with HIV. It's also a method of HIV prevention. ART reduces the amount of HIV in the body, which makes it harder to transmit to others. People living with HIV who reach and maintain what's called "viral

suppression" (fewer than 200 copies of HIV per milliliter of blood) have effectively no risk of sexually transmitting HIV to an HIV-negative partner.

There are also prevention tools for people who haven't been diagnosed with HIV. While HIV prevention is truly a group effort, it can look very different from person to person. A health care provider can do a risk/needs assessment to determine appropriate next steps, which might include taking pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and using condoms to reduce the risk of acquiring HIV.

Okaloosa CHD offers free HIV testing at both locations:

Fort Walton Beach

221 Hospital Drive NE

Monday, Wednesday, Thursday
7:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.
12:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.

Tuesday
7:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.
12:30 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Friday
7:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.
12:30 p.m. to 2 p.m.

Crestview

810 E. James Lee Blvd.

Thursday
7:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.
12:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.

Protect yourself. Get tested. Know your status. Learn what's next.

For more information, please call 850-833-9246 or 1-800-FLA-AIDS. Visit HealthyOkaloosa.com or KnowYourHIVStatus.com.

About the Florida Department of Health

The department, nationally accredited by the Public Health Accreditation Board, works to protect, promote and improve the health of all people in Florida through integrated state, county and community efforts.

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